

***Popped Culture: A Social History of Popcorn in America.* By Andrew F. Smith. (Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001 [University of North Carolina Press, 1999]. Pp. xxi + 264, ISBN 1-56098-921-1)**

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Norfolk Black Puma are now considered contemporary (and current) terrors, Westwood does not provide a description of Shuck that is more recent than the early 1980s. Having such a description would have been very useful, as it would have closed the loop on the story.

*Supernatural Enemies* provides the reader with an (at times bewildering) array of terrors. Aside from this, the authors use their topics to address larger issues, whether they be ties between the ancient and post-modern worlds, or the importance of schoolyard stories as folklore.

What is surprising about this book is its limited geography. It seems to reflect an Old World bias. The majority of essays deal with Western Europe. While Eurasia is represented, as are India and Japan, there is nothing about Africa, Oceania, or the Americas, except in passing. This may simply reflect the editors' backgrounds, given that Davidson's area is Northern Europe, and Chaudhri's specialty is Ossetia. Nevertheless, it is hard to see why the New and Third Worlds were neglected. Perhaps a future edition of the book could correct this.

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***Popped Culture: A Social History of Popcorn in America.*** By Andrew F. Smith. (Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001 (University of North Carolina Press, 1999). Pp. xxi + 264, ISBN 1-56098-921-1)

It's easy to imagine a general book about popcorn being not very good. But despite the corny pun in its title, *Popped Culture* is a good book. It has what you would want if you were teaching a course on the evolution of popular foods, their vernacular preparations and their meanings. It has a good index, a very full and useful bibliography, and excellent attention to its sources in the form of real reference notes. And it has many pages (fifty!) of small-font, well-documented, historical recipes for popcorn.

This is not a supermarket book. Andrew Smith, its author, teaches food history at the Open School University in New York and has written previous books on the history of tomatoes and on ketchup. It is a scholarly book that happens to come on the recent great wave of popcorn popularity.

The book opens with a balanced history of popcorn, basing that history in what is known and on the identification of what cannot any longer be known. He bursts open the popular American idea that native Americans showed the technique of making popcorn to the Pilgrims in the early seventeenth century. Smith shows it to be a late nineteenth century figment, part of the growth of a national foundation myth in America in that time.

What then, I can hear you ask, really is the origin of popcorn? Read Smith's opening chapter for a better explanation, as it is more complex than I can serve up here. The history is clouded — the name "popcorn" arrived much later than the thing itself, so there is little early documentation on its invention and spread. But Smith does a good job of dispelling some of that cloudiness. Suffice it to say that more grains pop than just corn or certain strains of corn. Some grains pop better than others and a hard kernel helps in this regard. For centuries, corn has regularly been parched, that is dried somewhat, to prevent sprouting and to help long-term storage. No doubt it was in the process of accelerated parching that the propensity of some strains to pop was discovered. Perhaps very early indeed: archaeological evidence in New Mexico suggests Amerindians were eating it from time to time about 5000 years ago (8).

The popcorn craze began in New England in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. It was not the autochthonous development later writers had it. Based on import records, Smith suggests the fad came from South America, and perhaps from Africa. Corn was a New World species, but it had spread quickly around the world after the Spanish established themselves in the Americas. Popcorn seems to have been popular in Mexico in the seventeenth century but no earlier records exist. Nonetheless, there are indications of it having spread to China by the end of the sixteenth century.

But popping corn did not resemble the social and culinary phenomenon it is today until the middle of the nineteenth century. And, yes, that was an American thing. Or, rather, Smith presents only American sources on the mid-nineteenth century efflorescence of popcorn culture; perhaps it was more widely done. But in any case, by 1848, American dictionaries recognized the word "popcorn" and, by the end of the American Civil War, popcorn was an icon of American popular culture, with outdoor "popcorn furnaces" at local fairs

throughout that country. The American Patent Office was getting lots of inventions for home popping and magazines were distributing recipes for cakes, candies, dressings, and soups made from popped corn.

Reading *Popped Culture*, as I did, simultaneously with Jared Diamond's best-selling *Guns, Guns and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1999) made its first main chapter, the historical one, a particularly refreshing read, like a specially prepared footnote to Diamond's more ambitious but less scholarly work on — among other things — the development of agriculture around the world. Smith is a careful researcher and a careful writer without being either disingenuous or disengaging. I like *Popped Culture*.

Canada, by the way, is mentioned in the book's good index, mainly for developments in twentieth century products. W. T. Hawkins of Tweed, Ontario — best known to me for their (corn-derived) Cheezies — was a leading manufacturer of caramel-corn. And, Smith notes, Canada's canola oil was touted at the end of the twentieth century as the most healthful oil in which to prepare popcorn, that is, before the widespread awareness of trans fats produced when heating any oil. But, overall, Canada plays a very small role in this book which, as you can imagine given the topic, its author, and its publisher, is mainly about the United States of America. Popcorn is American food but this book may stay a little too close to home. The chapter called "The Invention of Popcorn" really only deals with the nineteenth century fad for it in America. The historical chapter is called "The Pop Heard 'Round the Americas."

In the mid-1970s Orville Redenbacher traded on his "country hick" appearance, linking his "gourmet popcorn" to a traditionality it never really had, and invented for the purpose. This worked especially well in Canada where, according the current (2003) Boy Scouts of Canada website, eighty litres of popcorn were eaten by every Canadian in 2001. In 1975, its second year of commercial distribution, Redenbacher's *Gourmet Popcorn* was the top seller in Canada. It took five years to achieve that status in the U.S.A. and by 1989 one third of all popcorn sold in that country was Redenbacher's (143).

The self-appointed world popcorn capital, by the way, is Schaller, Iowa (148). Since 1951, that town has had an annual popcorn parade and crowned a Popcorn Queen. But Smith notes that the status of

“capital” might be argued by Dayton, Ohio, whose airport is littered with high-quality popcorn shops (146).

As the subtitle indicates, *Popped Culture* is a social history, and perhaps most of all it is an economic history of popcorn. But readers of *Ethnologies* will be happy that a great deal of cultural history comes through. Some gaps appear: for instance, the recent interest in microwave popcorn is not fully treated.

The recipes I mentioned above appear mainly to be ephemeral concoctions made for magazines, but some of them are clearly home-style preparations with real credentials as folklore. Jokes, poems and songs appear in the book. My favourite, originally from a 1909 magazine article on “popcorn frolics,” joins at least a couple of genres (178):

Best Evers  
Four tablespoons of water boiled  
    With sugar, just one cup;  
Cook till its bubbles big declare  
    That it is “waxing up”;  
When dropped in water cold it makes  
    A soft and sticky ball,  
Now crush some popped or buttered corn  
    And slowly pour it all  
Into the well-whipped white of egg,  
    And stir it constantly;  
Then spread on wafers or saltines  
    To brown in oven, you see.  
They surely are delicious bits  
    To eat with cream or ice!  
The boys who “pop” and the girls who “cook”  
    Will find them always nice.

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## Reference

Diamond, Jared. 1999 [1996]. *Guns and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: Norton.